The Boats CRONIN and HUGHES

A Research Exercise

March 1, 2020

The Dolphin Swimming & Boating Club of San Francisco is extremely proud of its fleet of historic wooden row boats, some over a hundred years old, one dated 1887, but still used daily. These boats are mostly sliding seat lapstrake singles or doubles and durable enough for the rough conditions of San Francisco Bay. Volunteer club members, directed by a master boatbuilder, keep alive the fading skills required to repair and restore these aging wooden boats.

The fleet consists of over twenty such boats, and the history of each is well-documented in terms of the original builder, date, place, materials, specifications, etc., along with a log of maintenance and restorations. However, two boats, CRONIN and HUGHES, have lacked such complete records. Over the years the identity of their original builder had been lost. Their stern boards display the same date, 1938. Unfortunately, Dolphin Club Board meeting minutes from that era are missing, and the publication of *Dolphin Log* newsletters didn't begin until 1949.

This article will describe a recent project to uncover missing details about these valuable boats using public sources and a few remaining club records.

Both boats are nearly identical Dolphin Club lapstrake doubles with sliding seats, each 18-foot-long, 54-inch beam, and weighing about 380 pounds. They are named for important Dolphin Club members. James J. Cronin was a member from 1891 to 1956 and club president in 1906. Lawton Hughes was a member from 1919 to 1982, president in 1938 and 1966, plus a champion oarsman and rowing coach.

The first research breakthrough came a few years ago while digging through the club's paper archives and finding a contract dated July 8, 1936 to build two boats. Technical specifications matched the two boats now of interest. However, who was this person, O. E. Irving, contracted to build them? The club's cash books, handwritten records of the Financial Secretary, indeed show subsequent installment payments being made to "O. E. Irving." City directories and U.S. Census records disclosed that an Olville Eden Irving, age 46, was living on Ashbury Street. He was a carpenter, a furniture maker, but not a hint of having boat building qualifications. He wasn't a club member, and not finding any other connection, the matter was set aside.

By chance, attention then shifted to Bill Richards, a known builder of a few Dolphin Club boats, although he wasn't thought to be involved with the CRONIN and HUGHES. William Jennings Richards was born in 1880 in Penance, Cornwall, England and immigrated to San Francisco by way of British Columbia in 1916 with his wife, Hilda. In the 1920 U.S. Census his occupation was "Porter," but for the 1930 and

1940 Census records he is described as "Boat Builder." There is strong circumstantial evidence that Richards developed his boat building skills during the 1920's in Thomas R. Keenan's shop at 249 Jefferson Street in San Francisco. Keenan was born in 1870 and joined the Dolphin Club in 1892 as a competitive rower. In 1895 he entered the boat building business supplying and repairing racing boats for many Pacific Coast clubs. For current Dolphins, Keenan is best known for building the FARRELL in 1917, a double which is still in full service. The FARRELL is used for comparison in the 1936 contract to build CRONIN and HUGHES. Thomas Keenan and his business both died in 1933.

Then in 1934 Bill Richards became closely associated with the Dolphin Club. Living in a nearby apartment at 860 North Point Street with his wife, Richards was the salaried club caretaker for the next decade. Although being a daily figure, evidently he never became a dues-paying club member. In June 1946 handball court "B" was converted into at workshop for his use. In March 1947 the Dolphin Club Board commissioned Richards to build three new boats for $400 each. These three lapstrake singles, the BAGGIANI, FOSTER, and LANDUCCI, all dated 1948, became the template for future club boats. The club still has his original three boats plus six more of the same design, slightly modified Whitehalls. Also, in 1948-1949 Richards helped to construct the Joseph Keenan dining room, now the club's gym/weight room.

A brief time later, the September 1950 *Dolphin Log* included a short paragraph beginning with "Bill Richards, the boat builder of Keenan fame, will leave the Dolphin boat shop this week and retire at Oroville." Also stated was that Richards had built shells and sweeps for practically every club on the Coast, plus two other Dolphin Club boats specified by name but no longer around. Most likely, this describes a worker in Thomas Keenan's shop in the 1920's.

Bill Richards retired to Northern California and passed away in 1959. Finding his obituary just recently connected and made sense of these seemingly random stories. Printed in the *San Francisco Examiner*, August 4, 1959, his obituary mentions a surviving daughter, Mrs. Bessie Irving, in San Francisco. Could that name, Irving, be the missing piece of the puzzle? Yes! A review of census and other public records confirmed Elizabeth M. Irving to be the wife of the mysterious Orville E. Irving. It was subsequently proven by a copy of their marriage certification in Victoria, Canada, on Sep 10, 1917, witnessed and signed by William Jennings Richards.

So, what can we conclude from this exercise? Payments to build the CRONIN and HUGHES were made to the son-in-law of Bill Richards, but almost certainly Richards participated in the project and was probably the lead craftsman. Maybe Orville Irving then helped Richards build the three boats a decade later. To be sure, Bill Richards deserves even more credit than previously thought for helping to create and preserve the historic wooden boats of the Dolphin Swimming & Boating Club.

Richard Cooper

San Francisco Examiner

Tuesday, August 4, 1959, Page 27

RICHARDS—In Redding, August 3, 1959, William Jennings Richards Sr., beloved husband of Hilda Richards; loving father of William J. Richards Jr. of Redding, Mrs. Marge Chute and Mrs. Bessie Irving, both of San Francisco and Mrs. Betty Hill of Vancouver, B. C.; a native of England; aged 80 years; a member of the Dolphin Club of San Francisco.

Funeral services will be held Wednesday at 10:30 a. m. at the Meininger-Dusel Mortuary, Redding. Interment, Redding Cemetery.

Bill Richards in 1948

T. Stair.

July 8 1936

Dolphin Swimming and Boating Club
San Francisco, Calif.

Gentlemen;

I agree to build for your club, two lapstreak double Row Boats about the size of the "Farrell". Planking to be of sugar pine, foundation of oak, copper fastened burred and riveted, fitted with two pair bronze rowlocks, two pairs sculls and rudders, finished with two coats of varnish. The boats will weigh about 240 pounds each.

The two boats to be delivered complete at the Dolphin S & B Club for the sum of $702.00. (Lettering of the name board extra at 25¢ per letter.)

Insurance on the boats during the course of construction to be carried by the builder.

Payments and Delivery of First Boat

First boat to be started Aug. 1st and finished within 90 days;

Payments as follows;

$100.00 Payable upon acceptance of contract
$100.00 " " " completion of planking
$151.00 " " " delivery and acceptance of completed boat
$351.00 TOTAL OF FIRST BOAT

11/8/36

Payments and delivery of Second Boat

Second boat to be started immediately upon completion of first boat and finished within 90 days

Payments as follows;

$100.00 Payable within 5 days after completion of first boat
$100.00 " " upon completion of planking
$151.00 " " " Delivery and acceptance of completed boat
$351.00 TOTAL OF SECOND BOAT

SPECIFICATIONS AND IMPROVEMENTS

Length-18 ft. over all
Width - 4 ft. 5 in. (inside plank)
Depth - 19 inches
Install heavy Ring bolts in Bow and Stern and strong enough to hold weigh of boat.
Reversible rowlocks to be used on either left or right side ofboat.
Rowlocks to be equiped with Swivels for chains
Bow of boat to have more flare-about 2 inches more shear than the Farrell.
Make 1 inch greater distance between the two sliding seats.

Make shoes flatter, heels same distance toes farther out
One more plank -smaller garboard
Woodshoe on keel
Bow sheet back to ~~mark~~ first thwart(To be used for abow seat and landing for getting in boat)
Open gunwale
Brass Bow, Stern and Skeg bands
Sliding seat tracks to be elevated 1 inch
Broad stern like Farrell
Bottom floor board in bow to be one piece
Removable floor boards
Wider ribs

Yours Respectfully,

C. C. Irving

429 Ashbury St.

FOR THE DOLPHIN S & B CLUB

Lawton B Hughes

Henry Simonin

John A Grossman

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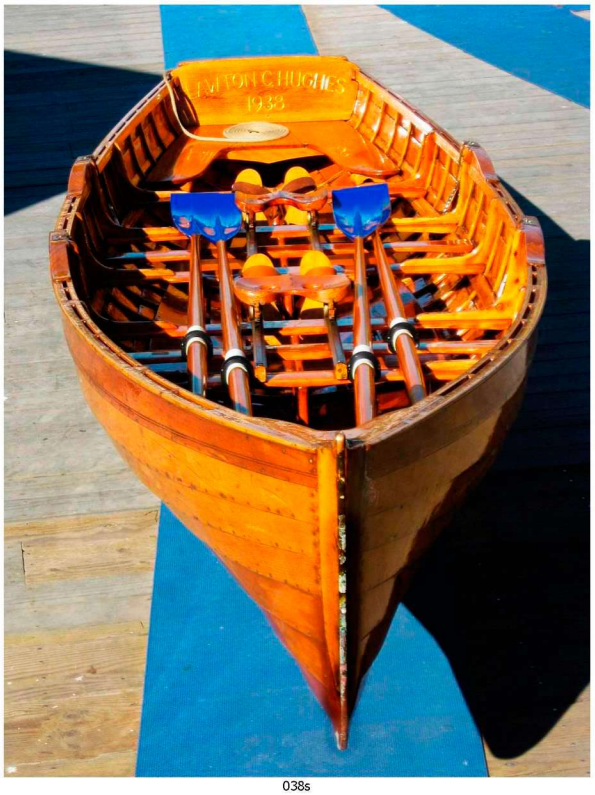

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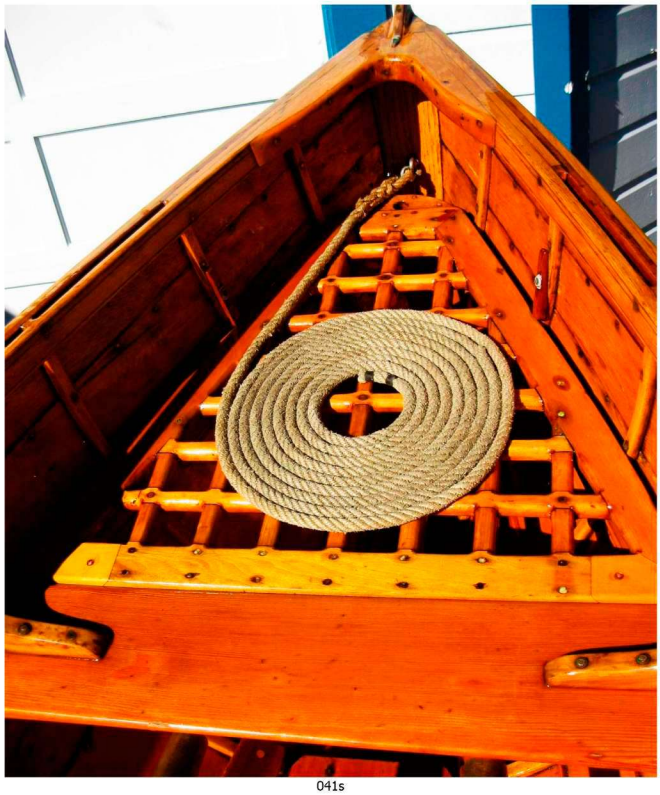

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